



The New Arab Cold War And The Struggle For Syria

By: **Curtis Ryan**

Abstract

In his classic study, *The Arab Cold War*, Malcolm Kerr charted the machinations of inter-Arab politics during an era dominated by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In another renowned work, *The Struggle for Syria*, Patrick Seale documented the links between Syria's tumultuous domestic politics and the broader contest for supremacy in the region, stemming from factors ranging from inter-Arab conflicts to the global cold war. Today, amid the chaos in Syria and the transformations in the region, these texts, both originally published in 1965, seem all too contemporary. Once again, regional politics shows many signs of an Arab cold war and, once again, that broader conflict is manifesting itself in a struggle for Syria. In the Arab cold war of the 1950s and 1960s, inter-Arab relations were characterized by power struggles between "revolutionary" republics, led by pan-Arab nationalist military officers, and more conservative or even reactionary monarchies. The republics saw themselves as the future of Arab politics, with the aim of changing not only the type of regime in Arab states, but also the map of the region through repeated unification efforts. This pan-Arab project led to extensive intervention in the affairs of various states, by both sides, as the republics and monarchies waged proxy wars in civil conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere. Many of the same elements - power struggles, ideological and identity conflicts, and proxy wars - are present today. The main difference is that the 2012 version of the Arab cold war does not array revolutionary republics on one side. Over time, the radical republics of the 1950s and 1960s became deep-seated authoritarian states, neither revolutionary nor particularly republican. Many of them have now experienced actual national revolutions, as opposed to the military coups of past decades that tended to be cast as "revolutions." On the other hand, the greatest similarity to the earlier cold war is the mobilization of conservative monarchies attempting to block another wave of change across the Arab regional system.

Ryan, C. (2012). *The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria*, Middle East Report 262 (Spring 2012). Publisher version of record available at: <https://merip.org/2012/03/the-new-arab-cold-war-and-the-struggle-for-syria/>

The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria

Curtis Ryan *In: 262 (Spring 2012)*

In his classic study, *The Arab Cold War*, Malcolm Kerr charted the machinations of inter-Arab politics during an era dominated by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In another renowned work, *The Struggle for Syria*, Patrick Seale documented the links between Syria's tumultuous domestic politics and the broader contest for supremacy in the region, stemming from factors ranging from inter-Arab conflicts to the global cold war. [1] Today, amid the chaos in Syria and the transformations in the region, these texts, both originally published in 1965, seem all too contemporary. Once again, regional politics shows many signs of an Arab cold war and, once again, that broader conflict is manifesting itself in a struggle for Syria.

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As the monarchical regimes increasingly cooperate in self-defense, the question is: Against what? Until the 2011 uprisings, the answer seemed to be the non-Arab threat of Iran. Many Arab regimes were concerned not only with Iranian power, but also with Iranian influence and interference in Arab politics. Arab conflicts from Iraq to Lebanon were viewed increasingly in both power politics and sectarian terms: as proxy battles between Saudi- and Iranian-led blocs in the regional balance of power and also as struggles between Sunni and Shi'i alliances in the greater Middle East.

The first signs of the new Arab cold war predate the Arab uprisings of 2011-2012, and became especially clear during the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah. [2] Some Arab states chose to view this Arab-Israeli war, unlike all previous ones, in sectarian terms. While Arab states did not support Israel in the conflict, few rose to the defense, even verbally, of the Iranian-backed Shi'i organization in Lebanon. Yet the 2006 conflict signaled another key shift that was perhaps a harbinger of events in 2011: the clear rift in many Arab countries between state and society. Arab governments (aside from Syria) may not have supported Hizbullah, but many Arab publics did. Arab street demonstrations made the link to the earlier Arab cold war period, with placards comparing Nasser in 1956 to Hizbullah leader Hasan Nasrallah in 2006. But as André Bank and Morten Valbjørn have noted, this comparison only underscored the differences between the two eras. Nasser was a head of state, with a secular, avowedly socialist approach to pan-Arabism. Nasrallah is head of a mass movement with an Islamist approach to Arabism and Arab identity. Bank and Valbjørn argue further that the differences make clear the shift in the meaning of pan-Arabism itself, from an ideology of struggle used by secular states to a "new societal Islamic Political Arabism." In their formulation:

A societal Political Arabism rising from an Arab-Islamic public rather than a state-led Pan-Arabism constitutes a dominant frame of reference in Middle East regional politics today. Societal actors, not upstart republics, now represent the challenge to the regional status quo. The rivalry is also no longer primarily an inter-state competition, but a cold war between Arab regimes and societal actors led by Islamists with considerable popular support and subscribing to a popularly driven Islamic Political Arabism. [3]

Failure to grasp the continuing importance of Arabism, and its changing form, led many outside observers to miss key dynamics in regional politics. F. Gregory Gause has argued that this interpretive lapse caused most scholars of the Middle East to miss the hints of the Arab uprisings. [4] Scholarship had too often treated pan-Arabism as long dead, missing its continuing salience at the social level and hence at the political level as well. [5]

Today, states, societies and social movements struggle over the meaning of pan-Arab identity. Unlike the Arabism of the earlier Arab cold war, the modern version does not emphasize redrawing borders and revamping governments through unification schemes. Rather, the new struggle more often involves conflicts within domestic politics, sometimes with a dimension of external intercession. Hence, there are multiple levels of meaning in inter-Arab struggles: Conservative monarchies rediscover the importance of Arab unity as a language of mutual protection from regime change; Arab Islamist movements challenge regimes and connect with peers across borders; and pro- and anti-democratization forces work not only within states, but also across states, in their attempts at collaboration.

The Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 have deepened the divisions of the new Arab cold war, including along Sunni-Shi'i lines. And like the earlier cold war, the contemporary one features competing approaches to intervention in the affairs of other Arab states. But the current version, while displaying sectarian and power dimensions, also includes new dynamics emerging from the Arab uprisings themselves. Today's Arab cold war features not only state-state rivalries, but also state-society conflicts characterized by reemergent Arab identity politics, a public sphere expanded by a revolution in media and communication, a rise of Islamist social and political movements challenging incumbent regimes and, finally, new norms and popular expectations regarding participation in public life.

These dynamics have led to a reassertion of foreign policy activism on the part of conservative monarchies, to the point that one of the most active forces in regional politics today, somewhat amazingly, is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC is no military juggernaut, but has risen to prominence because the uprisings came at a time when the three traditional (and often rival) power centers — Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus — had all receded from the regional balance of power. Each state was overwhelmed with domestic concerns: Egypt with its own revolution, Iraq with the effects of US invasion and occupation, and Syria with its own uprising. Domestic unrest and insecurity had forced the regimes in Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus to cede the stage to Riyadh and, more surprisingly, to Doha. These changes in regional dynamics have had important effects for uprisings in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and now Syria. And this time, there is no countervailing force to check the conservative monarchies...unless it comes from the people under their rule.

The Saudis and other GCC regimes were so alarmed at regional trends that they reached out to decidedly non-Gulf kingdoms, in Morocco and Jordan, inviting them to join the council. Morocco showed limited interest in joining the faraway alliance, while Jordan scrambled to revive an application that had been on the table for 20 years. [6] It is still unclear if any expansion will occur. The GCC remains, in any case, an alliance of conservative Arab and Sunni hereditary monarchies, this time not against radical Arab republics or even Iranian revolutionaries, but against the restive peoples within their own borders. While not inviting Yemen to join, the GCC did attempt to dampen the fires there by brokering deals to trade partial regime change for an end to unrest. Still, despite Saudi efforts to use the GCC as its main tool in a regional counter-revolution, other GCC states often break with Riyadh and maintain defiantly independent foreign policies. Despite the bilateral Saudi-Iranian cold war, for instance, Oman and Qatar have each maintained cordial relations with Tehran. [7]

The rise of Qatar to at least temporary status as a regional "power" is perhaps the oddest phenomenon in contemporary inter-Arab relations. The tiny but immensely wealthy peninsular monarchy has steadily enhanced its regional and even global role, from hosting rounds of World Trade Organization negotiations in 2001 to landing the World Cup scheduled for 2022. Qatar is also home to the influential Al Jazeera satellite news channel, which has provided exhaustive coverage of most of the Arab uprisings. The Gulf emirate has also positioned itself as broker of peace in conflicts between factions in Lebanon, Palestine and even Afghanistan, with the Taliban opening an office in Doha.

When the Libyan uprising began, Qatar led the call for international intervention. When the wave of revolt reached Bahrain, Saudi Arabia led the counter-revolution and the GCC intervened militarily to support the Bahraini monarchy against pro-democracy and pro-reform demonstrators. Echoing the sectarian logic of 2006, the intervention was framed as Sunni solidarity against Shi'i (and allegedly Iranian) subversion.

While the Libyan revolution led to civil war and outside intervention, including an extended NATO campaign of air strikes against the Qaddafi regime, the Syrian uprising threatens to take an even more dangerous path, both for the Syrian people and the region as a whole. The Syrian crisis began as part of the Arab uprisings, with civilian activists marching for greater freedom and openness in Syria. It was only after the regime responded with violence in Dir'a that protest movements sprang up across the country. These movements, too, began peacefully but were met with force. Eventually, calls for reform became calls for regime change. The Arab League went asking President Bashar al-Asad to cede power to a deputy was crafted under Qatar's temporary (rotating) leadership of the Arab League council, with strong GCC support. Indeed, the idea of Arab League monitors in Syria had a similar genesis, and the GCC states were accordingly the first to withdraw their monitors in early February (followed closely by GCC aspirant Jordan) when they deemed the mission a failure.

The Syrian imbroglio bears all the hallmarks of the new Arab cold war, including domestic struggle between a regime and opposition each with outside patrons, attempts to fan the flames of sectarianism, and dueling narratives regarding who is really attacking whom. Like the earlier Arab cold war, the conflict is awash in propaganda and disinformation. Even honest media attempts to understand the Syrian revolution too often distill the conflict to a ruthless regime versus the Syrian National Council (a collection of opposition groups in exile) and the Free Syria Army (a relatively small set of army deserters who have now started an armed campaign against the regime). What is missing, more often than not, is the overwhelming majority of Syrians working at the grassroots against the regime and linked to neither the Council nor the Army.

Meanwhile, the GCC states leading calls for international pressure to oust Asad are hardly themselves bulwarks of democracy. Their aim is not to favor democracy over authoritarianism, but rather to topple a largely 'Alawi (and hence, in their view, Shi'i) regime allied with Iran. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and their allies appear to be hoping that a successor regime in Damascus would be predominantly Sunni, indebted to the GCC states and no longer an ally of Iran or Hizbullah. Their motivations, in short, seem more in line with those of the new Arab cold war than with the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people. With Iran and Hizbullah backing the Asad regime, and the GCC states and Turkey actively opposing it, the Syrian conflict is already becoming a regional conflict. As the United States, Britain and France call for action through the UN Security Council, blocked only by rival imperial powers Russia and China, the Syrian crisis has assumed international dimensions as well.

Still, despite the usual level of disarray and rivalry associated with inter-Arab relations, the Arab League — led by Qatar and the GCC states — did manage to create a semblance of unity as it attempted to craft a way out of the Syria crisis. While not calling for military intervention, the Arab League proposal called for Asad to cede power to his vice president, paving the way for a negotiated end to the fighting and the creation of a Syrian unity government. The Russian and Chinese veto of the Arab League proposal in the Security Council, however, ensures that the Syrian conflict will become more violent and more internationalized, as the Asad regime attempts to crush the rebellion once and for all, Syrian resistance groups turn increasingly to armed struggle, and Arab states and others intervene in other ways — supplying arms, materiel and financial support to their chosen side.

The battle lines outside Syria are already drawn, with the US, Britain and France in conflict with Russia and China, while regional non-Arab powers Turkey and Iran similarly back opposite sides. Israelis are torn between which outcome is worse for them, while Arab neighbor Jordan is perhaps in the weakest and most dangerous position of all, wedged between Baathist Syria and the GCC, and deeply vulnerable to the instability engulfing its northern neighbor.

The struggles of the earlier Arab cold war were particularly virulent in Syria, from independence in 1946 to the coup d'etat that established the authoritarian regime of Hafiz al-Asad in 1970. As both Kerr and Seale demonstrated, Syria in their view was a key battleground in regional struggles between republicans and monarchists, among nationalists, communists and Baathists, and between global superpowers. Coup after coup toppled governments in Damascus as rival civilian political parties and military officers maneuvered against one another, aided and abetted by local and global cold war dynamics. Today, if anything, the dynamics seem even worse, as external powers including the GCC, the Arab League, Iran, Israel, Turkey, the United States, Britain, France, Russia and even China spar over Syria's future. A plunge into full-scale civil war would be all too reminiscent of Lebanon (from 1975 to 1990) or Iraq (after the 2003 US invasion). A negotiated diplomatic solution stipulating some level of regime change and a more inclusive government — one that ousts Asad but manages to depend on the fears of 'Alawis, Christians and Muslims alike — seems a desirable alternative to the conflict in Syria. While much will depend on the efforts of Syrians themselves, today, as in the earlier cold war period, much will also depend on the cooperation—or rivalry—associated with external Arab, regional and global powers. Indeed, if Syria is allowed to tip into the abyss, there could be a disaster comparable to Lebanon's or Iraq's, as the struggle for Syria once again widens the fissures of an Arab cold war, the dynamics of which may doom the hopes of the Syrian people.

Endnotes

[1] Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) (third edition) and Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

[2] Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide," *Middle East Report* 242 (Spring 2007).

[3] André Bank and Morten Valbjørn, "Bringing the Arab Regional Level Back In: Jordan in the New Arab Cold War," *Middle East Critique* 19/3 (Fall 2010), p. 312.

[4] F. Gregory Gause III, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2011).

[5] Curtis R. Ryan, *Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009), ch. 3.

[6] The Jordanians had asked to join the GCC many times. While Gulf labor markets, oil, gas and aid were all clear incentives to join, the Jordanians also made the case that they had much to offer the GCC: a highly educated work force and formalized military, intelligence and security cooperation. Though Saudi Arabia had proposed the invitations to Jordan and Morocco, at press time the GCC remained divided — with Qatar and Oman particularly lukewarm — over the idea of adding members. The bureaucratic wheels for GCC expansion have begun to turn, but the outcome is uncertain. Interviews with Jordanian policymakers, Amman, December 2011.

[7] Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis* (Winter 2012).

How to cite this article:

Curtis Ryan "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 262 (Spring 2012).